

Wong kept his eye on the curtain, waiting for something to happen



MR. WONG RETURNS

By LEE FREDERICKS

Deep in Chinatown's cellars, Richard Wong of the Secret Service faces death by torture at the hands of the vengeful Sing On Tsu!

CHARLES DURBANO, of the United States Secret Service, did not look up as the office door closed with a click. He chewed his stogie furiously as he examined the report in front of him and then cleared his throat.

"It's about time you showed up, Williams," he grunted. "You will have to get these papers ready for court on the

Wade case."

He stopped, sniffed the air and then looked up open-mouthed.

"You and those Oriental perfumed cigarettes, they'll get you killed some day," he continued without a pause as he looked at the khaki clad figure in front of him. "When did you get in, Wong?"

Richard Wong smiled and blew out a

ring of purplish smoke before he answered.

"I just followed some plates across the country," he announced. "I lost them here in New York, though. Someone murdered Hu Shee."

"Dinner plates or soup plates?" Durbano asked caustically. "As to Hu Shee, the best I can ask you is, who her?"

Wong extracted a brown carved leather wallet from his hip pocket, opened it and put a new ten-dollar bill on the desk of his former chief. Durbano picked it up and scrutinized it carefully before he handed it back with a puzzled frown.

"If the one is queer, I would like to have the plates that made it," he said.

"You would have them if I had gotten to Hu Shee first," Wong said soberly. "This is a specimen that I took from a bale of them in Manila, but the plates had already departed for San Francisco. I got immediate leave and came back on a B-Twenty-Nine, but the plates had already left for New York in the hands of Hu Shee. By the time I traced her to her hideout, I found only the body."

While Wong was speaking Durbano was already out of his chair behind the desk, his stogie working wildly in his mouth.

"Why don't you ever tell a man what is going on in this upside down Oriental mind of yours?" he shouted. "If you've been on the case this long, it is about time I heard about it! Now get out after them!" He stopped and looked sheepish. "I forgot," he went on lamely. "You still have your military service to do."

WONG smiled again and pointed to the small golden button on his uniform which designated him as a discharged veteran.

"I received this in San Francisco," he said simply. "I'm looking for my old job."

Durbano put his hands up to his face and groaned.

"And to make sure that you have your job you bring in a case which is a headache to the department," he complained. "Things were going fine here, all the criminals were being good boys, and nothing but routine cases. Maybe they were waiting for you to come back."

He sat down again.

"Now why did you come up here with the report instead of working right along on the case?"

"I need to get into the files," Wong told him. "I want to get at the data on one August Fustig, alias Count Fustig."

"Fustig is dead," Durbano told him. "One of our men covered the funeral and we know it to be a fact."

"A Fustig is dead," Wong told him in a gentle voice. "I have every reason to believe that the original Count Fustig is very much alive and operating the same today as he used to operate. He had a brother who looked very much like him, you know."

Durbano looked at Wong as though he were ready to explode and then because he knew his Oriental operative, he restrained his emotions, controlled his face with an effort and looked at Wong with what he hoped was great calm.

"Okay, spill it," he said in a weary tone. "Maybe by the time you get to the end of the telling, I will know the beginning of the case."

"The Fustig part is easy," Wong said. "His fingerprints were all over the room where Hu Shee was murdered. The reason I want to see the files is to check on his travels and see whom he knew in San Francisco."

"Or Manila?" Durbano wanted to know. "Are you sure he didn't travel in the East so that he could study how to come back to life again?"

His voice was heavy with sarcasm which Wong ignored in the reply.

"No, the plates were stolen in Manila when the Americans were moving in. The Japanese were making counterfeit United States money and sending it to South America, you know. It helped them make purchases that they needed badly. Of course that is over now, but the plates were stolen by a person named Wah Sing and shipped to San Francisco in the bottom of a barrel of Tung oil. It was from the barrel that Hu Shee took the plates. She was bringing them to her brother, Sing On Tsu who planned to use them."

"And where is brother Sing?" Durbano wanted to know.

"That is something I would also like to know," Wong replied. "But right now I'm afraid that Fustig is the one I want first. He has the plates, and we want those before anything else."

While he was speaking a clerk opened the door of the office and shoved a fat file folio into Wong's hands.

"The file you requested," the clerk told Wong. "I think you will find it complete."

Wong took the file to Durbano's desk and sat down in the chair alongside of the desk and opened the file. Durbano's stogie moved in his mouth furiously, but he knew better than to interrupt Wong while he studied a case. He knew well enough that Wong had something on his mind about the contents of the file or he wouldn't be here in the office.

For ten minutes Wong turned over one report after another, studying all that had been done on the infamous Count Fustig. He finally closed the file and rose to his feet.

"I think the old Newark hideout leads to the most promise," he said quietly. "He has more friends there, two of them from San Francisco. It is from that place he spread the false five-dollar series back in

Nineteen Thirty-four. The money was put out by dealers in crooked Chinese gambling houses. He may try that same stunt again. You don't have the trouble with squealing passers that way." Wong started for the door of the office while Durbano glared after him.

AS WONG emerged on Thirtieth Street he looked around at changes which had taken place since he had been off to war. The old Ninth Avenue elevated no longer rumbled past the building and Ninth Avenue looked twice as wide in the absence of the structure. His eyes narrowed as he saw a cab cruising slowly toward him and as it drew near the curb he threw himself to the sidewalk and snaked his gun from its holster.

He was not a second too soon. There was a stuttering of a sub-machine gun and forty-five slugs whined harmlessly over his head as his own revolver spoke in return.

The machine-gun chatter stopped abruptly, and the cab lurched from the curb and careened wildly down the street, but not before Wong got in another shot and was rewarded by seeing the rear tire of the cab explode. Suddenly the cab gave a wild lurch across the street.

There was a sickening crash as metal met the brick of a solid building and then there was silence.

Wong waited a full second in his reclining position on the sidewalk before he rose to his feet and raced across the street to the cab. His gun had done a good job.

A man was slumped on the floor in the rear of the cab, machine-gun jutting from under his body and a neat round hole in the middle of his forehead. The driver was draped across the wheel, his head lolling in an unnatural position which told Wong that his neck was broken and he would

never speak again. Both men, Wong noted, were Orientals.

As a crowd gathered he slowly backed through a gap and slipped away in the direction of Tenth Avenue.

On the Hudson tube train to Newark he catalogued events as they had happened since his arrival in New York. The driver of the murder cab was a stranger to him, but the man with the machine-gun he knew as an old time petty smuggler on the West coast. There had been rumors the gunman had been a finger-man and killer for the racketeering union boss of the Chinese Canning Workers Union which had been broken up in the beginning of the war. But this had never been proved.

His brow was wrinkled in concentration. That this man should want to kill him seemed incomprehensible. He was known to be a friend of Hu Shee when she had a restaurant in San Francisco's Chinatown, and yet the facts were obvious. The cab had deliberately cruised in the neighborhood of the Secret Service Headquarters and that meant they were waiting for him and him alone. He dismissed further thought as the string of cars pulled into Newark Station.

He went out on Broad Street and caught a street car for Chinatown.

A half hour later Wong stepped into the presence of an old storekeeper who was bent down with so many years that he looked as though he could have been the grandfather of Buddha himself.

"Greetings, venerable one," Wong said as he paused in the doorway. "I come with news of your revered family in Canton."

The old man looked up with rheumy eyes in which there gleamed a sudden light of pleasure.

"First we shall have tea that has been grown on the beard of the Dragon," the old man told him in Chinese. "Then I would have news of you, son of my friend, for I

have not had the pleasure of seeing thy image in my aged eyes for these three years."

While the old man busied himself over a charcoal brazier brewing tea, Wong went directly to an old teak chest and threw up the lid. After removing his uniform he took several pieces of cloth from the chest and looked them over with a critical eye.

A few moments later he was dressed in a half Oriental, half Occidental garb which made him look much slighter than he really was and at the same time made very subtle changes in his appearance that turned him into an entirely different person.

The old man turned with teapot in hand. Apparently he did not notice any change in Wong for his expression was the same.

Over the cups of steaming tea Wong exchanged small chit-chat about families and gave news of his family to the old man. The man inhaled his tea noisily as an evident indication of enjoyment, and when Wong finished he leaned back and belched loudly to show that he had enjoyed himself. Then as he gathered up the tea things he looked at Wong with piercing jet eyes.

"There are tongues of evil unleashed on you, son of my friend," he said quietly. "There are those who say that you took the life of a countrywoman."

Wong's eyes narrowed.

"Lao-tse has said that words are like water falling from a cliff, their power lies in how many wheels they can turn."

THE OLD MAN grunted as he put the tea things away in the ceremonial closet.

"An illustrious ancestor of my unworthy self also once said words like a flowing river must have a source," he said slowly. "Have you had of food at the

Cherry Blossom Cafe since you have returned to our city?"

Wong smiled as he rose to his feet.

"I have not," he said gently. "But now that you remind me I find that my hunger is quite pressing."

"Be it not that you eat until the food is ingestible," the old man said to Wong who was heading for the doorway to the street. He smiled to himself as he opened a paper fan with a gesture of his hand. "But then it is said that the young have good appetites."

The Cherry Blossom Cafe was far from being as ornate as the name implied. For a full minute Wong stood in front of the entrance and regarded the customers as they came up and down the steps from the cellar cafe. The menu was written on a blackboard with white chalk outside and announced, in character writing, that the place served delicious meals with rice as light and fragrant as the lotus, all for twenty-five cents. The customers, though, looked innocuous enough, and Wong moved to the steps and descended.

The Cherry Blossom looked definitely faded to Wong as he opened the door at the bottom of the stairs and entered the eating place. The tables were with plain wooden tops, the chairs drawn up to the tables looked as though they had been used on more than one occasion for arguments as well as for seating. The waiters were slovenly and served in rolled up shirt sleeves while over all this presided, not unlike a huge toad, a fat and vicious looking proprietor.

The proprietor's eyes were snake-like in their brilliance as they surveyed Wong from their almond setting. To enhance the similarity to a snake they were also without expression of any kind as he spoke.

"A gentleman deigns to come into my unworthy place," he said in the guttural

tones of a Northman. "It is better, perhaps, that we show him to a booth so that he will have the utmost in privacy?"

The cards were falling, and though they were face down so Wong did not know the hand he held, he nodded assent.

The owner clapped his hands and one of the waiters scurried over.

"Take this gentleman to the booth," he said in a bland tone. "I am sure he is waiting for someone."

As Wong followed the waiter, he loosened the gun in his shoulder holster. He didn't know whether to curse himself as a fool for playing into the hands of these crooks, murderers and counterfeiters or to congratulate himself for the tip he had received from old Hung Chu at the grocery store.

He went through the curtained doorway in back of the waiter. It was an ordinary restaurant booth where one could eat in privacy. It would be an easy matter for him to jump out into the restaurant again in case of any threatened danger. Wong began to breath more easily.

The waiter bowed Wong into a seat and placed a filthy menu card before him. Wong pretended to look at the menu while the waiter retired, drawing the curtain behind him. When he was alone, Wong drew his gun from the holster and, keeping an eye on the curtain, waited for something to happen.

Five full minutes which seemed an eternity passed while Wong kept his eyes glued on the curtain. Several times the cloth swayed and he raised his gun to be in readiness, but nothing happened. He felt his eyelids getting heavy and shook his head, it only seemed to increase his feeling of sleepiness.

A warning bell sounded in his subconscious as he shook his head again.

"Gas!" he muttered, rose to his feet, made a gesture toward the curtain and then

fell flat on his face. . . .

Flashes of fire and geometrical designs in colored lights played in Wong's head as he came slowly back to consciousness. In some distant void in his head there was a dull throbbing and pounding. Wong found himself trying to open his mouth and had a sensation of its being filled with dirt from a zombie's grave. Through all of this voices finally penetrated.

"Be careful of him, sons of dogs," the high pitched voice said in Cantonese. "I want him to be in condition to feel every little thing that is going to happen to him."

WONG shook his head again and opened one eye experimentally.

What he saw made him close the eye again in a hurry. He was taped to an operating table so that there was no chance of any movement. Near him was a complete set of surgical instruments and hovering over the set was Sing On Tsu, brother of the murdered Hu Shee.

Sing On Tsu saw the flutter of eyelids and smiled evilly at Wong.

"Greetings, O killer of women," he said in a voice like flowing oil. "I did not think I would be so fortunate as to meet you so soon."

Wong forced himself to smile at Sing.

"You should know that I would be on the trail of the plates, and I may as well tell you now, someone else will take my place if I am to die here."

Sing started visibly and his eyes narrowed so they were almost closed as he looked at Wong with speculation.

"You said you are following the plates?" he asked softly. "What plates?"

"The plates your sister brought here to you before she was murdered," Wong said as he tried to make his voice calm. Inside, hope pounded wildly in his heart. He suspected that there would be some kind of doublecross, but nothing as weird as

what apparently seemed to be the truth from the actions of others.

For a full minute Sing On Tsu stood regarding Wong.

"You know I was very fond of my sister," he said softly. "I have been informed that you were seen coming from her apartment. Is this not true?"

"It is true," Wong told him. "I went there in search of the plates."

"And when my sister struggled with you and refused to give them to you? What happened then?"

"Your sister was in no condition to struggle," Wong said shortly. "She was lying in the middle of the floor strangled to death. I searched the apartment for the plates but didn't find them, so I came here."

Indecision showed in the eyes of Sing, and Wong started to fit parts of the jig-saw puzzle into place.

"I shot the hoodlum you sent to kill me," Wong told him, "His taxi is wrecked on Thirtieth Street in New York."

"I sent no one to shoot you," Sing On Tsu said. "I did not plan for you to have such a nice clean death as that. You interest me strangely, though, with what you have to say." Sing turned from Wong and clapped his hands. The man who had led Wong to the booth in the restaurant came into the room.

"I want you to get our other friend," Sing On Tsu told the waiter in Cantonese. "If he refuses to come, see that he arrives in any condition except dead."

The waiter bowed, and wordlessly left the room. Sing On Tsu turned to Wong again.

"It may be there is some truth in the words you utter," Sing On Tsu told Wong. "If this is the case you shall die decently, after you see the manner of death I had planned for you."

Sing On Tsu sat down in an easy chair

near the operating table and picked up a heavy book. Wong, by straining, could just see the top of the page. It was enough. The title of the chapter Sing On Tsu was reading was "Vivisection."

For a long moment Wong waited, inactive in all except his mind, his piercing black eyes on Sing while he read the book. Then slowly his fingers reached out toward the table of instruments.

He had seen a surgeon's lance, handle toward him which seemed to be within reach of his fingers, though his wrists were taped to the operating table. His heart felt like lead when he found the knife was a mere quarter of an inch beyond his reach. His hand dropped limply to the table.

His surprise knew no bounds when the table rolled slightly under the pressure. With gentle touch he pulled with his fingers and felt the table move slightly toward him. Another bit of pressure and the wood of the lance came within his reach.

Gratefully his fingers closed around the handle of the lance and he drew it toward him with the blade upward along his arm. A slight pressure and a second later he felt the razor-sharp blade cut into the tape and one hand was free.

HE DARED not move his arm across his body to free the other arm for fear the movement would attract too much attention from the reading of Sing On Tsu. But Wong's heart was much lighter. At least he had one arm free and he was not without a weapon of sorts.

It seemed as though Wong had waited hours though it was actually only a matter of minutes before there was a commotion outside the room. Wong watched while Sing On Tsu unhurriedly put the book down and rose and headed for the door.

Wong's free arm moved like a flash to free his other arm and then his feet, while

Sing On Tsu was in the act of opening the door which led to the passage outside.

The voice of the man outside was triumphant as he shoved a disheveled Fustig into the room. A second Chinese was with him and in his hands he carried a heavy paper-wrapped parcel.

"We found him with this," the heavier of the two Chinese said. "He is the one who says our countryman killed your sister and took the plates; but here are the plates."

Wong just managed to lie down again and simulate the position of being taped when Sing On Tsu turned to him.

"Apparently you have spoken the truth," he said to Wong, "Now you shall have the honor of seeing the one who maligned you die—slowly."

Sing On Tsu's triumph was short-lived.

While Sing's attention was diverted, Count Fustig made one wild lurch and grabbed the heavy parcel of counterfeiting plates from the hands of the astonished Chinese who held them. There was a sickening crunch as he raised the plates and brought them down on the head of the Chinese. He then turned, wild-eyed, to Sing.

"Thought you'd get me, eh?" he said. "Well, no yellow dog ever put one over on Fustig! Get it?"

Sing's answer was prompt. Fustig's eyes opened wide for the light glinted on blue steel of an automatic which had appeared in Sing's hands like a magic trick.

"Put those plates down gently," Sing said. "I may have use for them later."

Sing turned his attention to the second Chinese who stood in the doorway.

"Tie him up," he ordered in Cantonese. "Then go upstairs and bring down another operating table."

The Chinese left the room and Sing

turned to Fustig.

"Now, my friend, perhaps you will explain to me how you came to murder my sister?" he said softly.

Fustig's eyes were wild with fright. His jaw hung limp. To Wong it seemed as though he was about to slaver.

"I didn't mean to do it!" he protested wildly. "She came at me when I tried to get the plates from her. Those plates are mine as much as they are yours. I'm the one who found out where they were and had them shipped in the barrel of Tung oil. You meant to doublecross me, you—"

His eyes opened wide as Wong sat up on the operating table and then slid to the floor.

Sing On Tsu turned quickly to meet this new menace, but not fast enough. Wong was on him with all the speed of an uncoiling watch spring. His arm encircled Sing's neck while his knee came up in the small of his back in a jiu-jitsu hold which rendered him powerless.

For a second Fustig stood stupidly watching the tableau before him, unable to comprehend the speed with which it had happened. Then his face twisted in an evil smile as he crouched and crept forward.

This was something Wong had not foreseen. His move had saved the life of Fustig. Yet the man was entirely without gratitude, and his intentions were clear enough.

"You got a tiger by the tail," Fustig said as he moved forward. "I meant my man to get you in the city. But you can't let go now, and so you'll both die."

As he spoke he picked up the heavy plates and advanced with them upraised.

In front of Wong there was a sound like the popping of a cork from a champagne bottle.

For a moment Fustig stood looking stupidly startled—then slowly his knees buckled under him and he crashed to his

face on the floor.

"I'm sorry I had to do that," Sing said in a rueful tone. "He did not deserve to die so easily."

"You will hand the gun over," Wong said grimly. "No more monkey business or I'll break your back over my knee."

TO GIVE emphasis to his words, he tightened his hold.

"I was really very fond of my sister," Sing continued as though he hadn't heard Wong. "It will do you no good to threaten me. You have seen me do murder so it would be just as easy for me to turn this gun on myself which means the bullet would pass through me and into you."

For an answer Wong suddenly jerked back on Sing's neck, he could hear the spinal cord cracking under the strain as the back bent over his knee. There was a sharp cry of pain from Sing. Then he twisted like an eel, catching Wong off balance. They both crashed to the floor.

A searing pain crossed Wong's forehead followed by a million dancing lights in his brain. This told Wong that he was tackling an expert in jiu-jitsu. As Sing swung down with knife-edged palm for the jugular vein the second time, Wong was ready for him.

Knuckles folded under so that the tips of his fingers touched the edge of his palm, Wong came up with a straight jab which landed exactly on Sing's Adam's apple. Sing sighed like a leaking balloon and collapsed.

Groggily Wong scooped up the gun from where it had fallen on the floor. It had a small attachment at the mouth of the barrel with perforated holes. Wong had seen many silencers and knew what it was. The feel of a gun in his hand was like a tonic, the cobwebs caused by that first jugular blow cleared from his head and he stood erect for a moment while he listened

for footsteps outside.

Once assured that no one was there, he stooped and picked up the unconscious Sing On Tsu and slung him over one shoulder like a sack of meal. The counterfeiting plates he picked up and carried under his arm. If he encountered resistance now, he would have only limited use of the gun in his hand but it was better than nothing.

Outside the room he found a flight of stairs leading upward. Sounds of chinaware being handled came down the stairway, that meant the kitchen of the Cherry Blossom Cafe. There was no way out there; he would be cut down before he moved five feet.

He put his foot on the first step before he remembered the words of Lin Tzung, the prophet.

"It is written that the wise animal has more than one escape from his burrow," he quoted to himself and quickly took his foot from the step and looked around the passageway.

There were three rooms leading from the passage at the bottom of the stairs. Wong looked them over one after the other. Two of them were barren. The third held a collection of boxes and barrels, obviously the storeroom of the restaurant. This room Wong entered.

A few moments of examination and Wong's eyes lighted.

In one corner behind a pile of boxes there was a jagged hole in the brick wall just large enough for a man to crawl into. Wong lighted a match and held it in front of the hole. A current of air coming into the cellar blew it out.

He nodded to himself. That current of air meant that the hole led to the outside somewhere. Without any more ado he crouched and entered, with difficulty dragging the unconscious Sing On Tsu behind him.

The tunnel was a crude affair cut in the dirt and not even shored up, but the earth above was solid and the tunnel was a short one. It led on about fifteen feet underground and then suddenly let out into a more spacious masonry tunnel high enough for a man to walk in by stooping.

Wong used another match to get the direction of the air current and then grinned. Under his feet was a maze of what looked like twisted black snakes, he was in a tunnel of one of the telephone company's main trunk lines for the downtown area of Newark.

The match did not go out one second too soon. There was a shout from behind him that came through the dirt tunnel and then the sound of a heavy explosion as someone cut loose with a revolver.

Wong looked into the short tunnel and saw a gleam of a flashlight being played into the tunnel. He took the silenced gun he carried with him and pulled the trigger once. There was a howl from the other end of the tunnel as the light was shot out.

Wong smiled to himself. "That will hold them back for a little while at least."

YET trying to keep his footing on the slippery cables, walk in a stooping position and at the same time carry an unconscious man in his arms while he clung to the counterfeiting plates, made Wong realize what a job Atlas had carrying the World on his shoulders. It seemed to him he had been stumbling for miles, though it couldn't have been more than a block when his extended fingers touched the cold steel he had been waiting for, the rungs of a ladder that would lead to a manhole in the street above.

He shifted his burden to his shoulders and started the climb. A few seconds later he encountered the heavy iron of the manhole cover and shoved. To Wong it seemed like the labors of Hercules before

the cover finally budged. Then with a sudden lurch it sprung upward and the full light of day smote him in the face.

"Glory be, and the saints preserve us," he heard from above him.

A steady Irish hand of a blue-coated policeman reached down and grabbed Wong by the collar.

"Here, come out of that," the policeman ordered.

It took Wong a matter of minutes to explain who he was to the skeptical law officer who had grabbed him, but once convinced the policeman moved with alacrity. His whistle shrilled in short blasts as he helped Wong and the unconscious Sing On Tsu into the corner drug-store.

While the druggist worked over the still limp Sing On Tsu under the watchful eyes of the policeman, Wong headed for the telephone. He noticed the policeman didn't trust him too much, for as Wong phoned the officer loosened the gun in his holster and kept a wary eye on Wong. A few moments later Wong left the booth.

"A Secret Service car will be along in a few minutes," he announced. He looked

at Sing who was just starting to stir under the strong fumes of ammonia.

The man would be all right in a little while.

Several hours later a freshly bathed and properly dressed Wong met Durbano at the Federal Detention House. Durbano looked at Sing On Tsu with contempt while he chewed viciously on his stogie.

"So this is the man who had the plates, eh? He don't look like Fustig to me."

"He isn't Fustig," Wong said. "This is the man who planned to make counterfeit money with Fustig."

"Then what do you mean by bringing me down here under the pretense that this case is ended?" Durbano shouted. "We've got to get this Fustig, too."

Richard Wong watched Sing On Tsu's face. It had turned the color of yellowish gray putty as he waited for Wong to accuse him of murder, a crime that would keep his remains from going back to China for honorable burial in the family plot alongside his now dead sister.

"Fustig is dead," Wong said. "He had an accident, a most regrettable accident."